Uintah Railway, Whiskey Creek Trestle
Baxter Pass Road & Whiskey Creek Road
Rangely vicinity
Rio Blanco County
Colorado

HAER No. CO-10

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P. O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Uintah Railway, Whiskey Creek Trestle

HAER No. CO-10

Location: At the junction of Baxter Pass Road and Whiskey Creek Road, about 25 miles south and west of Rangely, Rio Blanco County, Colorado

UTM: 12.660480.4398110
Quad: Davis Canyon, Colorado

Date of Construction: ca. 1906. Abandoned 1938

Present Owner: Craig District Office
Bureau of Land Management
U. S. Department of the Interior
455 Emerson
Craig, Colorado 81625

Present Use: Abandoned/moved.

Significance: The Whiskey Creek Trestle is the last remaining bridge along the abandoned Uintah Railway in Colorado. The Uintah Railway was built during 1905-1906 to haul gilsonite from Dragon, Utah, to Mack, Colorado. This was a narrow gauge railroad that surmounted 6 percent grades over Baxter Pass. Not only was the railway engineered over very difficult terrain, but it was also a sole product line. Only gilsonite and passengers were carried on the Uintah. The Whiskey Creek Trestle, while a rather ordinary pile-driven trestle, is significant in that it is the only remaining part of the Unitah Railway that is remotely intact. The roadbed leading up to and away from the trestle is intact and a visitor can see how and where the railroad was constructed. This site, as a representation of the Uintah Railway, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on April 22, 1980.

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I. HISTORY

A. The Whiskey Creek Trestle and the Uintah Railway

The Uintah Railway was incorporated in 1903 for the purpose of hauling gilsonite, an asphaltic material, from the Barber Asphalt Company's mines at Dragon, Utah, to a railhead at Mack, Colorado, where the recently-completed Denver and Rio Grande's mainline could haul the mineral to the East. Costing $1.75 million, the Uintah Railway was one of the last narrow gauge railroads built in Colorado. It was designed to haul only gilsonite. The railroad was somewhat unique, in that it ran north-south from the Grand Valley and, in doing so, it opened up the lower White River country and the Uintah Basin in Utah.

Construction of the Uintah entailed major engineering feats. To begin with, the line rose from Mack, Colorado (elevation 4,541 feet) to Baxter Pass at an altitude of 8,343 feet. This occurred in 34 miles, meaning that the grade averaged a rugged 6 percent. Short trains, especially built cars, and very heavy locomotives were the rule on the Uintah Railway. From Baxter Pass, the line ran to Utah and the mines at Dragon, 53 miles from Mack. Later, the Uintah was extended to Rainbow and Watson, where new mines were opened, creating a final route of 62.7 miles from Mack.

The Uintah was built to haul gilsonite first and foremost. Hundreds of thousands tons of the sticky mineral were transported over Baxter Pass from 1906 to 1938. The asphalt was used to build thousands of miles of paved highways in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. Gilsonite was also used for such commercial purposes as making printer's ink and lining beer barrels. The Uintah also provided passenger service from Watson, Utah, to Mack, Colorado, on a regular schedule. Using specially-designed passenger cars, including short equipment for the tight curves, the Uintah hauled people back and forth from Utah. In addition, the railroad offered Sunday picnic service to McAndrews Lake, just north of Baxter Pass. The railroad's equipment was truly unique, in that much of it was built by the Unitah's own shops and was specially designed for the terrible operating conditions of the railroad. A surviving example of Uintah passenger car design can be seen at the Colorado Railroad Museum, Golden, Colorado.

The Uintah was built in a three-year period, with the mainline to Watson, Utah, completed in 1906. Later, the line to Rainbow, Utah, was finished. The railroad was narrow gauge (3 feet) and was laid on

hurriedly-constructed roadbed built along West Salt Wash on the south side of Baxter Pass and along West Evacuation Creek north of the pass. The roadbed was made of shaly soil and required constant maintenance, due to erosion. Across the numerous washes and creeks, the Uintah Railway built pile-driven trestles from 20 feet long to a massive wooden structure at Atchee, where the railroad crossed Salt Wash and began the ascent up Railroad Canyon. This curved trestle was 300 feet long and 100 feet high. It was later replaced by a huge dirt fill.

There were several other lengthy trestles, one north of Baxter Pass that crossed Whiskey Creek (112 feet long), one at East Evacuation Creek and another at West Evacuation Creek. Of these bridges, only the one over Whiskey Creek survives. One small trestle does remain intact near Dragon, Utah, but it has severely eroded into the creek bed and is not at its original elevation. The railway terminated at Dragon, with an extension to Rainbow Junction, Utah, from which spurs ran to Rainbow and Watson. From Watson, stage roads (now county roads) ran across the White River to Ignacio, and then into Vernal, Utah. Another road was built along the White River to Rangely, Colorado, where stage service was available for the first time. Both Vernal and Rangely were now served by stage and freight service at a greatly reduced cost, because of the Uintah Railway and its 62 miles of rails and trestles.

The Uintah Railway faced increased competition from trucks in the late 1930s. Not only did revenue from gilsonite shipments decline, but trucks began hauling the mineral directly from the mines to Craig, Colorado (where the Denver and Rio Grande's Craig Branch terminated) or into Salt Lake City, Utah. The Uintah Railway applied for permission to abandon the line during 1938. The abandonment began in late 1938.

Upon abandonment, the Uintah Railway's equipment was sold, the rails were torn up and shipped to Japan as scrap iron, and the roadbed was converted to a county road. Most of the trestles were retained for the new dirt road and were replanked to carry automobile traffic. Over the years, the road was realigned and the trestles were bypassed due to their extreme age or poor condition. Whiskey Creek Trestle was circumvented in the 1960s, when a large culvert was installed in the creekbed and the road was rerouted. The trestle sat abandoned from that point on. In the late 1970s, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recognized the trestle as an historic site. It was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. An interpretive sign was placed at the trestle, indicating its history and purpose. The trestle's approaches were blocked to prevent automobiles from using it.

The Uintah Railway was unique in a number of way. It was a major engineering feat in American railroad construction. It was one of the last narrow gauge railways built in Colorado, and it was constructed to haul only one product. In fact, it was the only gilsonite railroad in the world The Uintah used special equipment, often custom built, such as freight cars, passenger cars, and very unique maintenance-of-way equipment. This railroad was also the home of the world's largest Mallet-type tank locomotives. These two locomotives weighed over 240,000 pounds and could pull heavy loads over the 6 percent grades of the Uintah. They were articulated, in order to traverse the sharp curves of Baxter Pass. The Uintah's engines were the largest narrow gauge locomotives ever built in the United States and were both sold in 1940, one to a California logging railroad and the other to a Honduran banana plantation. Unfortunately, the Uintah's life span was short, due to changing transportation conditions, depressed gilsonite prices, and changes in technology. By the late 1930s, the Uintah was a memory of railbuilding that no longer existed.

II. WHISKEY CREEK TRESTLE

A. Description

This trestle was built across a semi-permanent drainage named Whiskey Creek, a tributary of West Evacuation Creek. The roadbed's approaches were graded by hand labor in 1905, and the trestle was built as the railroad extended northward. The rails were laid to the edge of the creekbed and a steam-driven railway pile driver was placed at the edge of the drainage. Wooden, 12-inch-diameter piles were driven into Whiskey Creek, using a rail-mounted driver. The decking was then rapidly installed by work crews. Once the deck was in place, the ties and rails were laid across the trestle to the northern roadbed approach. The line was then continued north to the next watercourse crossing, with the pile driver and other construction equipment using the completed rails, across Whiskey Creek to their new site.

The trestle itself is made of wooden pilings that are 12-inch-diameter timbers, made of five bents to span the creek. Between the bents, 8 x 12-inch sawn timbers were laid in sequences of six stringers across each bent, with the stringers resting on the bents. The bents were cross-braced on each side with 6 x 8-inch timbers. When the stringers were in place, rough-sawed planking was installed, using 2 x 8-inch boards. Ties were then fastened to the planks, and 85-pound narrow gauge rail was spiked to the ties. The trestle was "finished" with 4 x 4-inch "guard rails along each side of the tracks

to hold ballast. This method of construction was common railroad bridge building technology at the time, and the trestle is an excellent representative of the wooden trestle technique.

The Whiskey Creek Trestle is 112 feet long, with an average width of 12 feet. Because it is a narrow gauge bridge, it is somewhat narrower than the average railroad structure. The trestle is at least 40 feet from its center point to the creekbed, although the original creek was much higher than it is now. The pilings have been undercut by erosion to the point that several feet of what was once underground is now exposed.

B. Modifications

The Whiskey Creek Trestle has been altered. When the Uintah Railway was abandoned, the trestle was replanked with rough cut timber, of irregular size, running opposed the original planking. The boards were for the purpose of vehicular traffic and provided two "tracks" across the bridge. The ties and rails were removed. The car traffic boards were placed to provide for both trucks and automobiles.

In the late 1970s, the trestle site was also altered by the addition of a BLM interpretive sign and by posts to block the approaches to the trestle. These are mostly minor visual intrusions and did nothing to alter the structure itself.

C. Ownership and Future

The Whiskey Creek Trestle is owned by the Bureau of Land Management, U. S. Department of the Interior. It is located on Federal land, under the jurisdiction of the Craig District Office, Bureau of Land Management. In June 1987, it was decided that the trestle would be on permanent loan to the Museum of Western Colorado in Grand Junction, Colorado, for display purposes. The trestle has become unsafe, due to rotting stringers and undercut pilings, and it is so unstable that a heavy thunderstorm would probably wash the bridge downstream. A heavy snowfall would probably cause it to collapse. If someone were to attempt to drive over the bridge, it would collapse from the weight of the car. Considering the level of deterioration of the bridge, the Bureau of Land Management decided to move it.

Several options were considered, with the final solution being to move the bridge and preserve it. The Museum of Western Colorado contacted the U. S. Army Reserve's 994th Engineering Company (Panel Bridge) in Grand Junction, Colorado, who agreed to move the structure as part of its regular training. The trestle was moved to Grand

Junction during the summer of 1987, where it will be reassembled at the Museum's Cross Orchards Living History Farm (a National Register property) and become the core of a Uintah Railway interpretive display. Several Uintah freight cars have been located locally and will be restored to supplement the Whiskey Creek Trestle display. The trestle remains the property of the United States Government but, by moving the trestle from its original context, it will no longer be eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. However, it will be preserved in a museum setting and protected from further deterioration.

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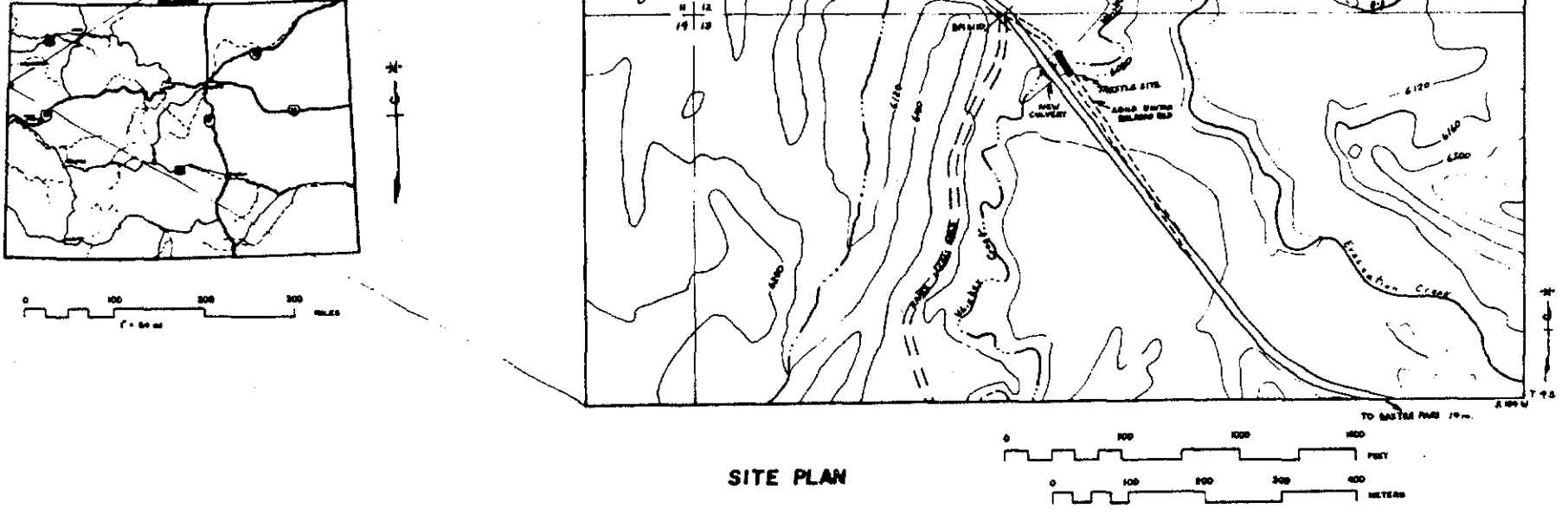
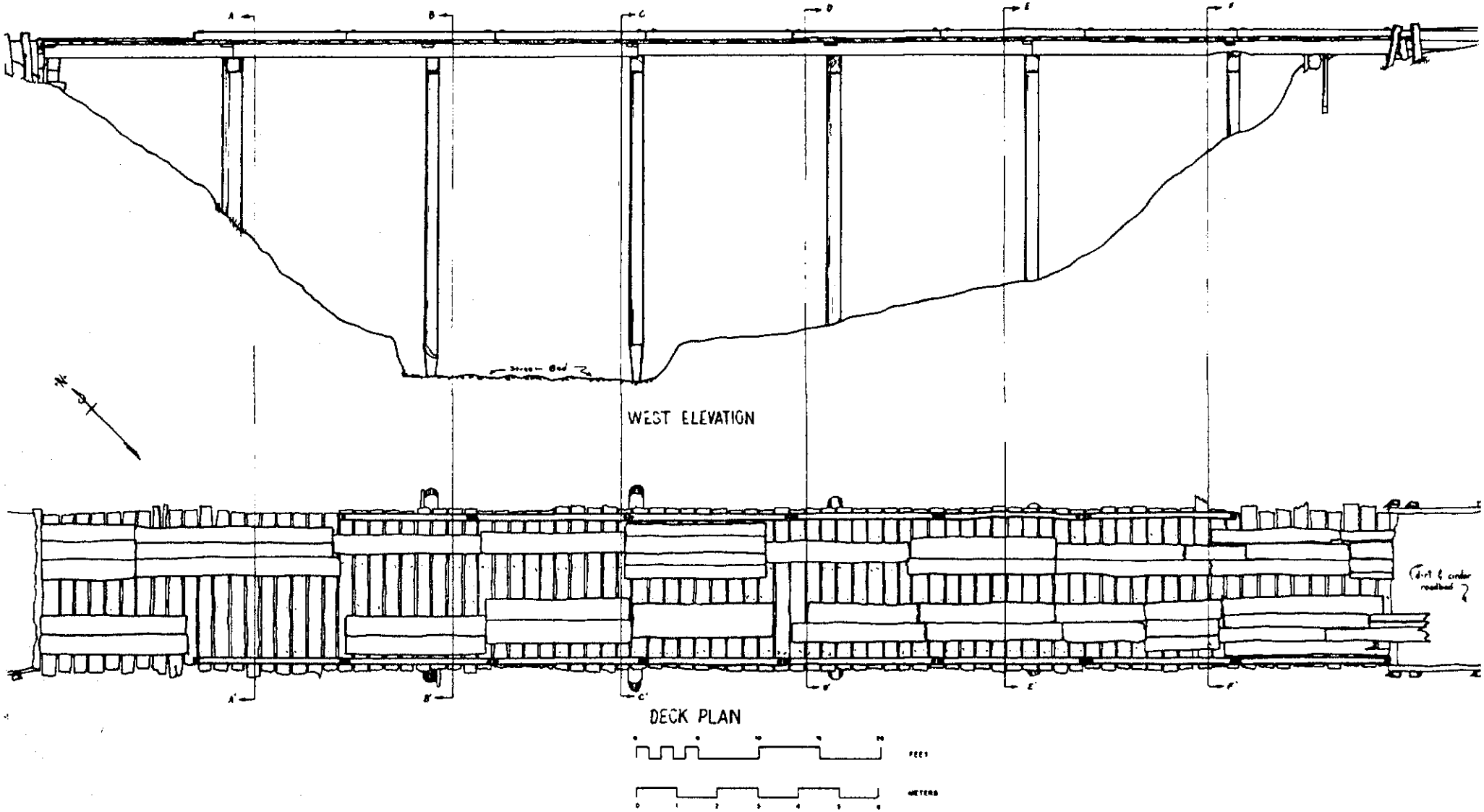
THE WHISKEY CREEK TRESTLE

THE WHISKEY CREEK TRESTLE REPRESERTS ONE OF THE LAST VISIBLE REMAINIRG PARTS OF THE UINTAR RAILWAY, BUILT IN 1906 FROM MACK, COLORADO TO DRAGON, UTAH FOR THE SOLE PURPOSE OF HAULIRG GILSONITE. THE UINTAH ALSO CARRIED PASSENGERS ARD MAIL FROM 1906 TO 1938 WHEN IT WAS ABANDONED. THE UINTAH RAILWAY WAS UNIQUE IN SEVERAL ASPECTS. FIRST, ITS ONLY PURPOSE WAS TO HAUL GILSORITE, AR ASPHALTUM PRODUCT. SECORDLY, IT WAS THE ONLY TRUE NORTH-SOUTH RAILWAY ON THE WESTERN SLOPE OF COLORADO AND AS SUCH IT CONNECTED THE GRARD VALLEY TO NORTHEASTERR UTAH. FINALLY, BECAUSE IT TRAVERSED BAXTER PASS, A TORTUOUS ROUTE UP THE BOOK CLIFFS, IT USED URUSUALLY LARGE AND HEAVY LOCOMOTIVES SUCH AS SEVERAL OF THE ORLY LARGE NARROW GAUGE MALLET TYPE LOCOMOTIVES EVER BUILT.

THE WHISKEY CREEK TRESTLE IS A TYPICAL PILE-DRIVER, RARROW GAUGE, STRUCTURE THAT SPARS ABOUT 110 FEET. THERE IS ROTHING UNUSUAL ABOUT THE TRESTLE SIRCE IT REPRESERTS A STARDARD DESIGN. THE TRESTLE WAS MADE INTO AN AUTO BRIDGE IN THE LATE 1930's. PLARKING WAS IRSTALLED FOR CAR ARD TRUCK TRAFFIC AT THAT TIME. SINCE THEN IT HAS BECOME SO URDERCUT BY EROSION THAT THE BAXTER PASS ROAD HAS BEER ROUTED AROUND THE TRESTLE. THIS IS THE ONLY STARDING TRESTLE ALORG THE UIRTAH RAILROAD RIGHT OF WAY AND AS SUCH IS THE BEST REPRESERTATION OF THIS URUSUAL RAILROAD, THIS SITE IS LISTED IR THE RATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES.



SITE PLAN


WEST ELEVATION
DECK PLAN